

Practice Makes Possible

A sermon by Angie Witmer based on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sunday, January 10, 2010

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

It was March, 1993. It had been a long winter and we were all ready for something fun, something that would get us out of the house. Fortunately, the circus was coming to town. My daughter Bailey was four years old—the perfect age for a first trip to the circus. So her dad and I bought the tickets and told Bailey that we had a surprise for her...but it would be two weeks before she could have it.

Those were the longest two weeks of my life. Every morning, Bailey would wake up and, before she got out of bed, say “Is today the day I get my surprise?” To which I would say “No, not yet.” “How many more days?” “10” “8” “5” It really didn’t matter how many days were left before the big day—the conversations were always the same. “Please tell me, mom. Ple-e-e-e-ase. I’ll clean my room. I’ll be really good. I won’t tell dad that you told me. Please??!!” Every day she would come to the realization that I wasn’t going to spill the beans. And then she would pout: “Fine.” Every day.

Although it felt more like two months than two weeks, the big day did finally arrive. It started out the same as the other days: Bailey woke up. Rubbed her eyes. Then asked: “Is today the day I get my surprise?” Instead of my usual “no”, though, this time I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. “Yes. Yes it is.” Her eyes flew wide and a smile spread across her face as big as I’ve ever seen. She jumped out of bed and danced around the room shrieking “Really? It is? Yay!!!! This is the day! I get my surprise today! Today is the day!” Then she ran downstairs, wolfed down her breakfast, got dressed—she even brushed her hair and teeth without being reminded—and then sat on the couch in the living room for hours, swinging her legs, waiting for the time to come.

I will say that the drive to Des Moines felt longer than usual as her dad and I fielded questions from the backseat: “So can you tell me what it is yet? Will I like it? Is it big? Little? How much did it cost? Is it fuzzy? Smooth? What color is it? Can I eat it? Will it fit on my lap? Let me guess: it’s a puppy. No. A Polly Pocket. No. Wait. A bike. Did you get me a bike?” The questions mercifully came to an end as we pulled into the parking lot of Vets Auditorium, parked the car, danced our way into the building and handed our tickets to the attendant. Bailey bounced up and down in her seat until the lights finally dimmed, the Ringmaster stepped to the microphone and the greatest show on earth got underway. We saw elephants and tigers and horses perform mind-boggling tricks. There were women wearing shiny, skimpy costumes swinging from a trapeze way above our heads. And men in equally shiny, yet not quite so skimpy, outfits riding motorcycles round and round and upside down inside a cage. Breathtaking is what it was. Amazing. Every time something happened, Bailey would laugh or ooh or aaah. She was having a great time. It was so worth it. Worth every moment and every penny.

The best part, though? About 30 minutes or so into the show, Bailey tapped me on the shoulder and said something that I couldn’t quite hear. “What?” I asked. She said it again, this time a little louder, but I still couldn’t quite hear her. “I’m sorry, B. What did you say?” She pulled me over to her, cupped her hands around my ear and yelled loudly: “WHEN DO I GET MY SURPRISE?”

Yes. She really did. “This is it,” I told her. “The circus is your surprise.”

“Oh.”

“Oh,” is right. All of the hype and buildup and excitement of the last two weeks had set the bar pretty high, evidently. Although she loved the circus, it wasn’t what she had in mind.

I imagine the same was true for the crowds hanging out with John the Baptist. They all seemed to be perfectly happy in their everyday lives, following him around, hanging out, working with him, learning from him. But John had to go and promise them something more. Something bigger. Something better. “You think this is great?” he said. “Just you wait. This is NOTHING. The one who’s coming is AMAZING. I’m not even good enough to untie his shoes—yes, he’s that good. He’s working with the Holy Spirit and he’s gonna set things on FIRE! Clean house! It’s gonna be AWESOME.”

Go back and read it for yourself. The picture that John paints for these folks is right there in the first paragraph of our reading for today. I have to admit, what he has to say is pretty impressive. This guy that’s coming, he baptizes with what? Fire? Wow. And what’s that about the Holy Spirit and a winnowing fork? Man, you hear that kind of hype long enough and I suppose you would expect the Messiah to be larger than life, hair flowing, shining like the sun, riding in on a big white horse, guns a-blazin’, whooping it up.

That really would be something to see, wouldn’t it? Yup. Pretty amazing. Especially if you’d been promised and had been waiting for a Messiah for hundreds of years. This guy couldn’t get there soon enough.

With that in mind, I can also imagine how these folks felt when they discovered that the one they’ve been expectantly waiting for is the guy described in the second paragraph of today’s reading. In this snippet from Luke, we all get our first glimpse of the grown-up Jesus. The Messiah. The Savior. Thing is, there’s no winnowing fork in his hand. No fire, either. No flash or pizzazz, even. Just a guy. In a crowd. Getting baptized with everybody else. Stopping to pray. Sure, there is a voice from the heavens and the Holy Spirit makes a brief appearance in the form of a dove—a little Hollywood action, if you will—but as far as we know Jesus is the only one that heard or saw any of that stuff.

So there you have it. This is the promised one. The one they'd been waiting for. Not exactly what they had in mind.

This past Wednesday, we started the season of Epiphany here in the church. It's the time of year between Christmas and Lent when we get to discover again, or maybe even for the first time, who Jesus really is...and who he really isn't. If we are paying attention, and if we're open to it, this season will be full of all kinds of "a-ha's!" and "really???'s" a couple of "wow's!" and some "hmmmm's", too, as we look at this guy through new eyes and figure out who he was and who he is and why it matters to us here and now. I'm not just talking about uncovering some interesting historical facts that we can discuss during fellowship time after worship or argue about around the dinner table. I'm talking about spiritual insights that have the potential to set our hearts on fire and change our lives. It's that important.

So, let's get started. What does this story from Luke—this very small glimpse into the beginning of Jesus' ministry—tell us about him? Well, it would appear that Jesus takes ritual pretty seriously. Big rituals—like baptism. And little rituals, too—like prayer. Things that connect him to other people seem to matter. And things that connect him to God seem to matter as well. In the stories to come in Luke's gospel—actually in stories found in all of the gospels—we'll find one example after another after another that Jesus is all about connections. Relationships. People in relationship with each other. People in relationship with God. That's what matters to him.

Anyway, these few verses from Luke are a pretty good and fair introduction to the guy who will become Rabbi, Lord, Savior, Messiah, and Christ to millions of people over the next couple thousand years. He's not about public image. He's not out to impress. He's just himself. And God is really happy with him, just as he is.

You know, Luke could have had angels in the sky blowing their trumpets and singing their praises as Jesus breaks onto the scene as an adult ready to take on the world—kind

of like they did at his birth. Or he could have had Jesus at least glow a little bit as he came out of the water at his baptism—like he will at the transfiguration a few weeks from now. Those things would have at least let everybody know up front that this guy was something special.

But he didn't. Actually, it seems like Luke does just the opposite with this story. He appears to go out of his way to downplay Jesus' debut in the public eye. Why? Well, maybe because over and over and over again, Luke will show us that Jesus isn't about doing things to get attention or impress people or flex his muscle. He's here to build relationships. He's here to practice faith. And change the world by showing us how to do those things, too.

Hmmmm.

As we start a new year—and start a new decade—this month, I imagine that there are more than a few of us who are looking for a fresh-start. A do-over. We want to be better people. Sure, we'd still like to lose some weight or organize our closets or get our finances in order. But a lot of us want something more. We want life. Deep down, we know that there is something missing. There's something that we just aren't getting. So here we are, in this place. Today. Searching for that something. One some level we know that that something is right here. We understand that what we do in this place is more than following doctrine or creating a set of goals to reach or mastering a set of skills. We are here because we know that what we do in this place is life-giving. Life-making. When we all come together, all of us from all walks of life, with all of our crazy, unpredictable, chaotic, funny, sad, wild, and boring experiences, things happen to us that would never happen if we went it alone.

Ron Buford wrote in the UCC Daily Devotional yesterday that “this is what church is all about. It's not about obligation, pleasing some temperamental deity, or the inspiring

sermons, music and liturgy. It's about something we often take for granted...the miracle that happens when God's diverse children gather, filled with expectation that God might show up to trouble the waters of our hearts and minds, filling our bellies with the unquenchable fire we need to get through another week, inspiring new ideas and action, gently descending upon us like an unexpected dove."¹

Yes. That's exactly it.

We gather together week in and week out to practice our faith. Not perfect it. There is no such thing, you know. Perfection? Ha. Practice makes perfect is a fallacy. Practice makes possible, though?² You bet. We practice praying here. We practice blessing. We practicing baptizing and believing and remembering...and when we practice, we make room for the Holy Spirit to descend on us, too—just like it descended on Jesus. And we create space for God to enter in and remind us that we are chosen and we are called and we are beloved. Just like Jesus.

There are some big moments coming up in Jesus' life. He's going to turn water into wine. And he'll walk on water, too. He'll feed thousands of people with a little bit of food and make a blind man see again by using a fist full of dirt and a little bit of spit. He is going to be in cahoots with the Holy Spirit and set people's hearts on fire—maybe John the Baptist's image of this guy wasn't so far off after all. Note, though, that Jesus doesn't start with these big, flashy moments.

He starts here. With faithful folks like you and me doing faithful, simple things that will hold him when it feels like he can't hold himself.

Maybe that's what Luke is trying to tell us. In order for the big things to happen, there has to be time and space for God to move among us and breathe into us. First. First there has to be time and space for God. The rest will follow.

So as we begin this new season and this new year and this new decade, let's start here with Jesus. If you're really serious about living a life that is amazing beyond anything you can possibly imagine—then give this Jesus guy and the rituals and the stories and his wisdom and his truth a try and his whole way of life a try. Start with community. And simple practices of faith. Just like Jesus did. Observe the high holy days and the ordinary everyday days, too. Sing the songs. Pray the prayers. Hear the stories again and again. Make space for the Holy Spirit to breathe in and around you. And listen for God to talk to you. It happens. It happens all the time. To people like Jesus. To people like you and me.

Oh, and don't forget: what God said to Jesus that day down by the river is true for you, too: No matter what happens and no matter how low and discouraged you feel, no matter what is happening around you and in your life, don't you *ever* let *anyone* tell you that you are *anything* but a *precious* and *beloved* child of God. ³

Happy Epiphany, everybody. May the days of this season be full of 'a-ha' moments, wonderful surprises, and may they lead to a life that is full and holy beyond all belief.

Amen.

¹ Ron Buford. Stillspeaking Daily Devotional. dailydevotional@ucc.org. January 9, 2010.

² Thanks to Brian McLaren for planting this seed in my brain through his book "Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices."

³ This particular reminder comes from Kate Huey's Sermon Seeds for the week of January 10, 2010. www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/january-10-2010.html.